DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 075 858 CS 500 225

AUTHOR Sheinkopf, Kenneth G.; O'Keefe, M. Timothy
TITLE The Eagleton Affair: A Study of News Diffusion.
PUB DATE Apr 73
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (Montreal, April, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Information Dissemination; Information Networks; Information Theory; *Mass Media; News Media; *Political Attitudes; *Political Issues; *Public Opinion; Social Attitudes

ABSTRACT

Twenty-five students recruited from a course in mass media and public opinion conducted telephone interviews with 162 residents of central Florida to assess their knowledge of the official dropping of Senator Eagleton as Senator McGovern's running mate in 1972. The broadcast media and television in particular served as a primary information source. The controversy caused by the actual decision and the events leading up to it during the week disrupted normal media exposure patterns among the majority of respondents. This paper examines these disruptions and finds several major variables significant in affecting news diffusion, including degree of interest in the outcome, actual time when the decision was learned, whether the respondent was a registered voter or not, and actual media reported as source of the news. The paper concludes with a discussion of the spread of information about McGovern's decision and how people attended to media as their normal exposure patterns were interrupted by their interest in this event. (Author/EE)

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The Eagleton Affair:

A Study of News Diffusion

by

Kenneth G. Sheinkopf

and

M. Timothy O'Keefe

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Department of Communication

Florida Technological University

Orlando, Florida 32816

Paper presented to the Mass Communication Division of the International Communication Association, Montreal, Canada, April 25-28, 1973.

CS 500 235

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Kenneth G. Sheinkopf
M. Timothy O'Keefe

Department of Communication
Florida Technological University
Orlando, Florida 32816

ABSTRACT
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On Monday evening, August 7, 1972, Senator George McGovern announced that he was dropping Senator Thomas Eagleton from his presidential ticket, climaxing one of the most controversial weeks in American political history.

Telephone interviews were conducted with 162 residents of Central Florida to assess their knowledge of the controversy's outcome -- the official dropping of Eagleton as McGovern's running mate. It appears that the broadcast media played a major role in quickly conveying the official announcement by McGovern. His decision was made public late that evening, and by early the next morning, more than 52 per cent of the sample had heard the news. Most of the respondents heard the news through the broadcast media -- only 16 per cent reported they first heard the news through print media or personal contact.

It appears that the controversy caused by the actual decision and the events leading up to it during the week (only 18 per cent of the sample reported they were not interested in learning of the outcome) disrupted normal media exposure patterns among the majority of our respondents. This paper examines these disruptions, and finds several major variables significant in affecting news diffusion, including degree of interest in the outcome, actual time when the decision was learned, whether the respondent was a registered voter or not, and actual media reported as source of the news.

Furthermore, more than one-third of the group said they discussed the decision with others after learning of the news, although most talked with less than three people about their reactions to the announcement.

The paper concludes by discussing the spread of information about McGovern's decision, and how people attended to media as their normal exposure patterns were interrupted by their interest in this event.

As Funkhouser and McCombs have noted, information diffusion is basic to the formation of public opinion, and the most prevalent diffusion process operating today is the mass media reaching mass audiences.[1]

More than 35 major news diffusion studies have been reported since the first one was undertaken in 1945. Hill and Bonjean[2] examined seven earlier studies in re-testing the Deutschmann and Danielson[3] assertion of regularity in the process of dissemination. Budd, MacLean and Barnes also examined past studies and related earlier hypotheses to their own findings.[4] Greenberg looked at the interpersonal aspect.[5] O'Keefe examined the diffusion process among a specialized rather than generalized audience.[6] Adams, Mullen and Wilson attempted to predict audience reaction according to emotional reaction.[7] And O'Keefe and Kissel examined the effect an event involving a visual figure can have in the diffusion process.[8]

It is the purpose of this study to build upon earlier diffusion work and to attempt to add new dimensions to diffusion research.

The event selected for study was the change of Democratic Vice Presidential candidates by Senator George McGovern during the 1972 election campaign. On Monday evening, August 7, 1972, Senator McGovern announced that he was dropping Senator Thomas Eagleton from his presidential ticket, climaxing one of the

most controversial weeks in American political history. It was no secret that several people turned down George McGovern's invitation to be his running mate in 1972. But Missouri Senator Thomas Eagleton accepted, and immediately after the July convention ended, the two men began planning their campaign. Shortly afterward, though, Eagleton admitted that on three occasions (in 1960, 1964 and 1966), he had been hospitalized for nervous exhaustion, and on two of these occasions, he had undergone electric-shock therapy for depression.

When they learned that the newspapers were about to break this story, the two men called a news conference in Sylvan Lake, South Dakota, so they could break the news themselves. After Eagleton spoke, McGovern announced that he still wanted Eagleton on his ticket, and shortly thereafter even announced he was "1000 per cent" behind his running mate.

Key Democrats and important financial contributors joined the hundreds responding to this political crisis, and McGovern received phone calls, telegrams and letters immediately, even as Eagleton carried on with his campaigning. This entire drama was conducted in full public view, putting McGovern in an awkward position. Either he had to keep Eagleton as his running mate, and thus have a man with him whose medical history was in question, or else he had to drop him from the ticket -- only a few days after standing firmly behind him.

Finally, on August 7, three weeks after he had named him as his vice presidential choice, McGovern invited the press to the Old Senate Caucus Room, and announced that Eagleton had stepped down as the Democrat's Vice Presidential candidate.

Procedure: The authors had anticipated McGovern's announcement, and had recruited 25 students in a mass media and public opinion course to participate in the study. The students were trained in the use and administration of the telephone questionnaire.

Names were drawn from the Orlando/Winter Park and other Central Florida telephone directories, and a questionnaire was prepared to measure the diffusion of news on the McGovern decision.

Actual data collection was conducted all day Tuesday, August 8 -- the day immediately after the official announcement. A total of 163 usable schedules were completed during this interviewing period. All interviews were conducted with the first eligible voter available at each household, with the average interview taking approximately five minutes to complete.

Hypotheses: One of the diffusion regularities that has been consistently uncovered in recent years is the predominance of the broadcast media in first reaching people with information about an event. This is not surprising, since on the basis of studies by Roper[9] and others, broadcasting (and television in

particular) is the United State's number one information medium. Therefore it was hypothesized.

H1: The broadcast media, and television in particular, are the primary source of information in news diffusion.

One thing that has stood out in many studies is the disruption in a person's normal channels of information that can occur in events of great importance.[10] Since the dropping of a Vice Presidential candidate had never occurred before in American politics, it was considered that the Eagleton story would be perceived as an important event by the American public. Therefore it was hypothesized:

H2: The importance of the various media as sources of information is in part a function of the daily routines of individuals, and when these routines are interrupted by the occurrence of a major event, the importance of the various media may be altered significantly.

Relevance has been a key factor in recent research in gauging the importance of an event to an audience. Adams, Mullen and Wilson even went so far as to categorize news events in terms of their impact on an audience's emotions.[11] As O'Keefe and Kissel found later, however, some refinement is still needed in this categorization scheme since visually prominent public figures seem to affect persons in unexpected ways.[12]

In this study registered voters, those to whom a candidate change would be most important, were considered the audience to whom the event would be most relevant. It was anticipated that their learning and behavior patterns, in relationship to the event, would show several important differences. It was thus hypothesized:

H3: Those to whom an event is more relevant would be more apt to learn of the event than those to whom the event is less relevant.

H4: Those to whom an event is more relevant would be more apt to discuss the event with others than those to whom the event is less relevant.

Despite the many diffusion studies that have been undertaken over the years, one factor that seems to have been almost totally neglected in examining diffusion patterns is the area of interest. The concepts of relevance and interest can quite often be mutually exclusive, although they have not always been treated so in the past. Just because an event may have relevance to an individual does not necessarily mean he will have any interest in it. The small number of voters who traditionally turn out for state and local elections are a good example of where relevance -- helping select those who will govern one's future -- does not automatically engender interest.

Therefore it was hypothesized:

H5: Those for whom an event contains some interest are apt to learn of the event faster than any other group.

FINDINGS

The diffusion of Eagleton's announcement to withdraw was pervasive and fast. Of those persons able to recall when they first heard the news, 60 per cent said they learned Monday evening soon after the announcement was made. Thirty-two per cent reported hearing the following morning, with the remainder learning throughout Tuesday. Virtually everyone reported knowing of the decision. Of the total number of respondents, 28 per cent were unable to recall when they learned of the event. As will be related in the following findings, most of these people classified themselves as uninterested in the outcome of the Eagleton saga.

Source of Learning: The first hypothesis, that broadcast media and television in particular would serve as the primary information source, was confirmed. Thirty-six per cent of the respondents said they heard the announcement of Eagleton's withdrawal through TV; 21 per cent through radio; 16 per cent from the newspaper; 3 per cent through more than one source, and 24 per cent were unable to recall specifically which source was first used.

Source Disruption: Employing a chi square test, the disruption in normal media usage was found to be significant at the .01 level. As table 1 shows, about a third of each group

said they did not learn of the event through their primary source of news information but through some other source. Television viewers were the ones least likely to learn through that channel, while radio and newspaper users were slightly more inclined to learn through their favorite source.

Relevance: It had also been hypothesized that those to whom the event was more relevant (in this case registered voters) would be more apt to learn of the event. Since nearly everyone knew of the event, it was not possible to satisfactorily test this hypothesis.

The other hypothesis concerning relevance, that registered voters would be more likely to discuss the event with others, was not found to be statistically significant although the data indicated this indeed was the trend.

Fifty-two per cent of the registered voters said they had discussed Eagleton's withdrawal with someone else, compared to 37 per cent of those persons not registered to vote. Nor was there any significant difference in the numbers of people the two groups talked to. Most said they discussed the event with between one and three other persons.

Interest: It had been hoped that it would be shown that interest in an event would be an important factor in determining

when a person learned of an event. While the results were not statistically significant, table 2 shows this may have been the trend. These who expressed the greatest amount of interest in the event heard sooner of Eagleton's withdrawal, but not to any appreciable extent. It was interesting to note that those who said they didn't care one way or another or who were extremely disinterested were the two groups least able to recall exactly when they heard of the announcement, this despite the fact that interviewing began shortly after the event.

DISCUSSION

The Eagleton withdrawal was not a good event in which to examine many of the variables under consideration since it captured the attention of almost everyone within 24 hours after the announcement of the withdrawal. Hence any attempt to isolate those factors which help predict news diffusion was greatly hampered.

Of importance, however, was the finding that source disruption once again occurred among the audience. This and other studies would seem to clearly indicate that source of learning and media habits are of primary importance to an audience only in the consideration of ordinary, everyday events. When something of unusual importance occurs, severe disruption will probably be the pattern of the day.

The matter of interest and time of learning is something that should be studied more extensively. The study of a more minor event would probably uncover some significant findings in this area.

FOOTNOTES

1. G. Ray Funkhouser and Maxwell E. McCombs, "The Rise and Fall of News Diffusion," Public Opinion Quarterly, 35:109-113 (Spring, 1971)

2. Richard J. Hill and Charles M. Bonjean, "News Diffusion: A Test of the Regularity Hypothesis," Journalism Quarterly, 41:336-42 (Summer, 1964)

3. Paul Deutschmann and Wayne A. Danielson, "Diffusion of Knowledge of the Major News Story," Journalism Quarterly, 37:345-55 (Summer, 1960)

4. Richard W. Budd, Malcolm S. MacLean, Jr. and Arthur M. Barnes, "Regularities in the Diffusion of Two Major News Events," Journalism Quarterly, 43:221-30 (Summer, 1966)

5. Bradley S. Greenberg, "Person to Person Communication in the Diffusion of News Events," Journalism Quarterly, 42:489-94 (Autumn, 1964)

6. M. Timothy O'Keefe, "The First Human Heart Transplant: a Study of Diffusion Among Doctors," Journalism Quarterly, 46: 237-42, (Summer, 1969)

7. John B. Adams, James J. Mullen and Harold M. Wilson, "Diffusion of a 'Minor' Foreign Affairs News Event," Journalism Quarterly, 46:545-51 (Autumn, 1969)

8. M. Timothy O'Keefe and Bernard C. Kissel, "Visual Impact: An Added Dimension in the Study of News Diffusion," Journalism Quarterly, 48:298-303, (Summer, 1971)

9. The Roper Organization,Inc., "An extended view of public attitudes toward television and other mass media, 1959-1971, pamphlet published by The Roper Organization, Inc.

10. See O'Keefe, op. cit., O'Keefe and Kissel, op. cit.

11. Adams, Mullen and Wilson, op. cit.

12. O'Keefe and Kissel, op. cit.

TABLE 1

Source of News for Respondents Reporting a High News Usage of One Medium

	Most Used Medium for News			
	TV	Radio	Magazines	Newspapers
Learned Through Usual Primary Source	61.4%	68.2%	0%	68.9%
Turned To Other Source	38.6	31.8	100	31.1
	100%	100%	100%	100%

$\chi^2 = 51.641$

$p < .01$

TABLE 2

Role of Interest in Event as Determinant of Time Learned of Event

	Extremely Interested	Fairly Interested	Don't Care	Fairly Disinterested	Extremely Disinterested
Monday	18 (53%)	19 (38%)	8 (42%)	7 (50%)	2 (14%)
Tuesday	10 (29)	18 (36)	3 (16)	4 (28)	0 (0)
Not Sure	6 (18)	3 (26)	8 (42)	3 (22)	12 (86)
	34 (100%)	40 (100%)	19 (100%)	14 (100%)	14 (100%)

NA=41